

How Rushmoor Borough Council is delivering meaningful benefits through workplace mediation

Key Learning Points

- How the indirect impacts of formal grievance cases can cause significant organisational loss.
- How mediation can help to improve behaviour and relationships whilst protecting against the potential damage done by formal grievance cases.
- The benefits of working with an external mediation service provider for a compact organisation.

A simple and straightforward solution to a complex problem

In February 2017, Rushmoor Borough Council updated and relaunched their Dignity at Work policy with reference to the newly available mediation service they had recently implemented. Council employees now have the option to address and resolve any grievance through informal rather than formal process. Several cases have already been successfully resolved in this manner. Policy, governance and promotion of mediation is owned by the council's Human Resources (HR) department, while the service is delivered by South East Employers (SEE).

The decision to introduce mediation in addition to formal procedure was made in 2015. While standard process for policy change applied (requiring engagement with management, consultation with trade unions and review by the board of directors) the council was able to deploy the mediation service itself rapidly. The service was put in place during 2016.

Historically, whilst the Dignity at Work policy had highlighted informal resolution as a more appropriate approach to managing employee issues, it had not been accompanied by an enabling mechanism.

"Our policy needed a refresh," says Paul Dolling, former Principal HR Officer for the council. "It encouraged positive communication and better people management through informal resolution, but offered little practical support beyond that. In the absence of an alternative, employees could find they had only two options: do nothing or escalate issues to formal grievance."

For Rushmoor, the risk is not the likelihood of cases arising. Grievance cases have always been low in volume and frequency.

"We are a very stable organisation," Paul confirms, "and people are generally comfortable and content here. Poor people management is not an issue. The causes of discontent tend to concern the bigger picture – the political and economic situation at a national level, for example."

Instead it is the *severity* of the impact of any cases arising that has prompted the council to put the new solution in place.

The employee population of Rushmoor Borough Council totals three-hundred, almost all of whom are based in the same location. In that environment, formal grievance cases can be disproportionately disruptive – not only on immediate participants, but across the organisation and even the community around it.

"The indirect impact of a formal case can cause broader organisational loss than its immediate impact," explains Paul.

“The changes we’ve made over the last few years, including the introduction of mediation, will help us to maintain stability as we steer the organisation through our current transition.”

“They can create general disturbance and distraction. Assumptions can drive counter-productive attitudes and further decline in workplace relationships. Ultimately it can all cost time and money and undermine organisational performance. It can also undermine external reputation by making it appear that an organisation does not operate in accordance with its values.”

The officers of the council understood the risk and the need to do more to contain emerging issues and prevent them escalating beyond discreet control.

The answer was provided by SEE. Rushmoor has worked closely with them for twenty years, previously engaging their support in formal grievance cases. Because of their relationship and work with the council, SEE recognised that mediation would be an appropriate solution with which the council could more efficiently and effectively manage issues whilst mitigating their impact.

For Rushmoor, mediation was a compelling best practice proposition.

“Everyone could see that mediation was a simple and straightforward solution to a complex problem,” says Paul. “It could help us to improve behaviour and relationships whilst also protecting against the potential damage done when formal grievance cases take hold.”

Cultural resonance and strategic alignment

Mediation emerged as the solution while Rushmoor was already engaged in a comprehensive programme of organisational development, prompted by challenges arising from significant organisational restructure two years previously.

The programme aimed to create a more mature, resilient and sustainable culture of people management and employee relations, aligned to council priorities.

Mediation resonated strongly with the changing cultural landscape and the council’s vision to ‘listen, learn and deliver – better’. It also aligned well with the evolving employee relations narrative and complemented the broad range of organisational development interventions and improvements.

“The changes we’ve made over the last few years,” Paul adds, “including the introduction of mediation, will help us to maintain stability as we steer the organisation through our current transition.”

The value of an external mediation service provider

Engaging SEE as providers of the mediation service was a natural extension of the existing arrangement for grievance cases, but an external service was also critical to establishing the right mediation solution:

“Rushmoor is small and tightly-formed geographically. Everything overlaps and interrelates. It would be difficult to separate internal mediators from any cases arising. An external service completely sidesteps that challenge, guaranteeing total impartiality and confidentiality. That adds tremendous value in terms of employee assurance and enabling us to contain a situation.”

The skill of SEE mediators is equally important:

“Their ability to make mediation feel calm, balanced and safe helps both participants feel comfortable and confident. Managers and employees alike can get right into the heart of an issue without fear about potential adverse consequences.”

“I have no doubt that without mediation as an option, the cases we’ve had would have become formal grievances.

It is a much more positive approach with a much more positive impact. Both participants emerge from the experience in a much more positive place.”

Better outcomes, stronger relationships and powerful advocacy

Paul has been extremely impressed by the difference mediation has made:

“I have no doubt that without mediation as an option, the cases we’ve had would have become formal grievances. Instead, all parties have worked together to understand and resolve issues, finding mutual routes to mutually advantageous outcomes. It is a much more positive approach with a much more positive impact. Both participants emerge from the experience in a much more positive place.”

The positive impact on professional relationship capability is a key benefit:

“Mediation isn’t just about confronting or fixing an issue, it’s about becoming more aware, receptive and flexible. That kind of interaction helps managers and employees learn, be innovative and focus on reaching the best possible outcomes. They feel safer about approaching a situation and addressing underlying challenges, and help others feel safer as well. As a result, relationships are left intact – perhaps even stronger and more authentic than before. The shared contract of action and agreement generated in conclusion also provides a tangible foundation on which to rebuild a working relationship.”

Those who have participated in the process emerge as enthusiastic advocates.

“We’ve been unable to avoid positive feedback,” laughs Paul. “All participants have let us know how much mediation has meant to them. They’re almost effervescent about it. And it’s not just us they want to share it with, the message has been broadcast more widely. Good news can travel just as quickly as bad news.”

The organisation appears to be open and receptive to their advocacy.

“There’s less fear of dealing with an issue now, certainly. In-keeping with our other efforts (crucial conversations training, for example) experiences with mediation are encouraging people to become more aware of their personal impact and manage it more appropriately. It’s a positive learning experience for the individuals involved and a positive learning experience for the organisation as a whole.”



About Rushmoor Borough Council

Rushmoor Borough Council serves the communities of Aldershot and Farnborough in north-east Hampshire. The council was established in 1974 when Aldershot Borough Council and Farnborough Urban District Council joined to become Rushmoor Borough Council. The council has 39 councillors across 13 wards in Aldershot and Farnborough.

The council's stated purpose is to work with others to improve the quality of people's lives. They have four priorities that underpin this purpose, driven by a desire to listen, learn and deliver better. These four priorities are: sustaining a thriving economy and boosting local business'; 'supporting and empowering our communities and meeting local needs'; 'cleaner, greener and more cultural Rushmoor'; 'financially sound with services fit for the future'.

www.rushmoor.gov.uk

About South East Employers

South East Employers (SEE) is an independent and not-for-profit centre of excellence, advising and supporting employers. They are a leading provider of high quality consultancy and learning in areas of organisational change, leadership, compliance with employment law, governance and local democracy. As a central 'hub', they are a forum for networks, partnerships and shared learning. They aim to add value through their wealth of local knowledge, experience and professional expertise regarding the challenges and opportunities facing organisations today and tomorrow.

Since 2010 SEE have trained over 270 mediators and delivered over 60 successful mediations for a range of employers. They are regularly called upon to deliver mediation training and complex mediations in other regions.

The SEE mediation programme is designed and delivered to take account of real and increasingly complex workplace situations. It develops confident and mediation-ready mediators who can gain an ILM certificate on successful completion of the course and assignments.

www.seemp.co.uk